

Russian « religious experts » hired by a court against Jehovah's Witnesses have no academic credentials

By Willy Fautré, *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

HRWF (14.08.2017) - On 22 June 2017, **A. Ye. Tarasov, V. S. Kotelnikov, N. N. Kryukova**, three so-called religious experts of the **Center for Sociocultural Expert Studies** in Moscow appointed by a Russian court, signed an expertise concluding that the Witnesses' *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* is not a Bible (See <http://bit.ly/2u1kBag>). On the eve of a new hearing by the Vyborg City Court, it means that their holy scriptures will not be protected against potential accusations of containing extremist material and against a probable ban.

According to international experts in religious studies (See below), the Russian Center for Sociocultural Expert Studies is not known to have academic expertise in religious issues. Moreover, Ms. Kryukova who is one of the signatories of the report, is... a mathematician, according to Roman Lunkin, head of the Center for Religion and Society Studies at the Institute of Europe, Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow, and president of the Union of Experts on Religion and Law.

This is a clear attempt to circumvent the Law on Counteracting Extremist Activity, which prohibits declaring sacred texts, such as the Bible (for Christians), the Koran (for Muslims), the Tanakh (for Jews) or the Kangyur (for Buddhists), to be extremist. Additionally, the "expert study" bases its conclusion on theological grounds. For example, its authors object to the *New World Translation's* rendering of the Tetragrammaton * as "Jehovah" and falsely claim that the text was altered to fit the Witnesses' doctrine.

Jehovah's Witnesses and their literature have been subject to court-appointed analysis by the Center for Sociocultural Expert Studies in Moscow. One study was completed in August 2015 and was used as the basis for an ongoing case against the Witnesses' *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* in Russian. Another study was afterwards ordered.

On 28 July 2017, the Vyborg City Court resumed hearing the case to declare "extremist" the *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*. The case had been adjourned since April 2016 after the judge ruled in favor of the Leningrad-Finlyandskiy Transport Prosecutor's claim to appoint an "expert study" to declare the *New World Translation* to be "extremist."

Opinions of some international experts in religious studies about Russian "religious experts" in courts

Professor Robert C. Blitt, professor of law, University of Tennessee; former international law specialist, United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), United States:

"Russia has long relied on so-called expert studies for the purpose of categorizing and prosecuting certain religious groups. For example, in February 2009, the Russian Ministry of Justice established an Expert Religious Studies Council. This body had power to investigate religious organizations and reach conclusions regarding, among other things,

whether the organization espoused extremist views. At the time, it was chaired by **Aleksandr Dvorkin**, an individual who lacked appropriate academic credentials as a religion specialist and was already known as 'Russia's most prominent "anti-cult" activist.' Often, individuals appointed to such councils, or even those tapped as prosecution experts in judicial proceedings, lack necessary and even basic qualifications. These 'expert' bodies function simply to validate the government's prosecution, although there has been some recent indication of certain expert bodies occasionally finding against the government's interest. Findings from these and similar bodies should be considered with care."

Dr. Roman Lunkin, head of the Center for Religion and Society Studies at the Institute of Europe, Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow; president of the Union of Experts on Religion and Law, Russia:

"In defiance of all good sense, Russia's law-enforcement system generates completely ridiculous expert studies (and, it appears, they encourage loyal supporters to open expert centers). Regarding the Center for Sociocultural Expert Studies commissioned to analyze the Witnesses' Bible, not one of the experts has a degree in religious studies and they are not even familiar with the writings of Jehovah's Witnesses. Their analysis included quotes that were taken from information provided by **the Irenaeus of Lyon Centre, a radical Orthodox anti-cult organization** known for opposing Jehovah's Witnesses, as well as many other religions and denominations."—

Dr. George D. Chryssides, former head of religious studies, University of Wolverhampton; honorary research fellow in contemporary religion at York St. John University and University of Birmingham, United Kingdom:

"I do not know the names of the so-called experts who have been called upon by the State to express opinions on the Witnesses' organization, but other genuine scholars of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia have ridiculed these 'experts.' I have personally never heard of the Center for Sociocultural Expert Studies, and the fact that Internet search engines can find no information on it speaks for itself. I am a regular attendee and presenter at academic conferences where new religions, including Jehovah's Witnesses, are discussed. It is customary for attendees to indicate their institution or designation, and these so-called experts are never represented. One's credentials as an expert are determined by academic qualifications in the relevant field, publication in peer-reviewed journals, and a willingness to subject one's ideas to discussion in the appropriate arenas, such as academic conferences. Since the so-called experts whose opinion has been sought in Russia identify innocuous books such as *My Book of Bible Stories* and *The Greatest Man Who Ever Lived* as examples of subversive literature, this must call their expertise, as well as their motivation, into question."

HRWF Footnote

Alexander Dvorkin is also the head of the Irenaeus of Lyon Centre, a radical Orthodox anti-cult organization, and vice-president of FECRIS, the French international anticult organization massively funded until now by the French state.

For more opinions about Russian" religious experts", see:

<https://www.jw.org/en/news/releases/by-region/russia/expert-analysis-identifying-extremism-discredited-interviews/>

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